

Sermon

30 July 2023

I attended a teaching day in Wellington on Wednesday as part of a paper I am doing on reconciliation through Otago. We were a mixed group, mixed in age, mixed in ethnicity and mixed in denomination. We have to do a long essay and the lecturer, David Tombs, mentioned that as a primary source we have the material from the Royal Commission into Abuse in Care. He referred to the interim report which, he said, is very hard hitting. “I haven’t heard of any sermons written about it” he said. “Are people in parishes getting the information?”. As I was due to preach today, I felt it was a bit of a challenge to me.

So I draw your attention to the interim report, available online. It is a very clear, concise, unflinching account and analysis of the lifelong impact of physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual abuse on survivors and then on subsequent generations. It *is* very hard to read but needless to say, a walk in a park compared with what the survivors have gone through.

Acknowledging that we have not been able to adequately monitor ourselves as an institution, then Archbishop Philip took the initiative of putting us forward to become part of the Royal Commission procedure. What this has meant for Bishop Philip is fronting up to represent the perpetrators who have been Anglican clergy and others, listening to the survivors’ stories and responding. He has also visited survivors around Aotearoa in their homes. That is utterly harrowing work.

There is a section on the Royal Commission website specifically devoted to the Anglican Church. Bishop Philip is quoted at length. He acknowledges the gaps in and inadequacies of our church's response to date. He admits that all too often senior clergy will have known about abusers and have not acted to stop them. The Anglican church protected itself rather than the survivors all too often. These statements took courage, too.

What's the point of reading the report we might ask? Isn't it wallowing in horror? Can't we just put it all behind us and get on with our lives?

The report of the testimonies - over 2800 of them so far and the Commission's work has been extended for another year - gives the lie to the belief that what happened in the past stays in the past.

The estimated financial cost of the abuse that people have suffered in care between 1950 and 2019 to individuals and society is 219 billion dollars.

Just reading and engaging with this report is an act of respect and witness and a step towards reconciliation. It is a bridge.

My daughter talked to me last week about a situation she was struggling with. I jumped in with a helpful suggestion. "Can you just listen instead of coming up with ways to solve it?" she said. That pulled me up short. She simply wanted to be heard.

There is a strand of our Kiwi philosophy that says, "Well, it didn't do me any harm. I was beaten when I was a child and there's

nothing wrong with me. Get over it and get on with it. Life's too short". But the results of extensive research into the lifelong effects of what are termed Adverse Childhood Experiences have been known for some time. The work of the Commission shines more light onto this issue and Dr Rawiri Waratini Karena is quoted:

You take a stone, you drop it into a pond, it ripples. You are looking at intergenerational ripples... don't judge a person in isolation to their history. All issues and behaviours have a whakapapa. They come from somewhere for some reason. These things didn't just manifest out of the land. Everything has a whakapapa.

There are solid theological grounds for the work of the Commission - truth telling - the truth shall set you free - justice, comforting the broken hearted.

Jesus is close to the broken. Close to children. The passage from Isaiah he chose to quote when he appeared in the Temple at the beginning of his ministry illustrates this powerfully:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed.

Humans sometimes have what psychotherapist Susie Orbach years ago referred to as a need not to know.

Jesus doesn't let people away with denial – we see that with Peter. He gently reminds the Samaritan woman at the well of the truth of her situation, he points out the ways in which some of the religious leaders of the day place burdens on people rather than lifting them from them.

There have been calls for more prisons, for harsher sentences. A relative of mine works for the Ministry of Education, coordinating services for children with the highest levels of physical and mental disability. She observed recently: “If you have grown up witnessing domestic violence, been excluded from school, in foster homes, perhaps with foetal alcohol syndrome, where do you go from there? As a society”, she said quietly, “we need to be kinder to our children.”

As a church, in light of the Royal Commission we are tightening our procedures and policies concerning clergy and volunteers. It can be easy to roll our eyes and think what a waste of time, why don't we just get on with the work of the Gospel. Doing all we can to ensure that the people we come into contact with are not at risk of being harmed is as important work as any. When a person is harmed by a member of the church, especially a representative of the church, we know that that person's relationship not just with the church but with God is damaged, sometimes irreparably.

I am conscious that there may be members of the congregation who have themselves suffered abuse. Please speak with or contact a member of the ministry team if this korero brings up difficult memories so that we can stand with you.

One of the commentaries on the Gospel passage for today was entitled “Seeing where hope is hidden”. Each time we reflect the compassion of Christ, each time we don’t turn away from someone who is hurting, each time we speak out when someone makes a sweeping statement of judgement against a group in society or dismisses someone because of their circumstances, then we uncover a little bit of hope. We contribute to the growth of the mustard seed.

Rowan Williams wrote:

My charism, the gift given me to give to the community is my *self*, ultimately; my story given back, to give me a place in the net of exchange, the web of gifts, which is Christ’s church.

If we brush aside someone’s story, we diminish their personhood.

An anonymous survivor is quoted in the interim report:

Please listen to survivors, even when it hurts. The most vulnerable members of your communities need you to listen, to care and to help. If good people are courageous, we can stop abuse.

Reflecting on abuse and its effects is not to minimise God’s sovereignty, to deny the truth about the resurrection, to ignore the power of the Holy Spirit or the reality of healing. Nor is it to deny that our sufferings in that mysterious way can become sources of healing for others. It is rather part of confession of sin, and of complicity in sin, it is part of repentance, of turning to

God. Of the truth setting us free. And we have a Biblical tradition too of lament.

As we face into such difficult and challenging subjects, we can remember what God has done through a bunch of self-seeking, wayward and scheming characters, such as Jacob and Laban in our Hebrew Scripture passage today.

We can pledge to live out daily the injunction from our psalm:

Seek the Lord and his strength
Seek his presence continually.

Another translations puts it “seek his face always”.

We can hold to the beautiful words from our Epistle:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Please pray for those who have testified to the Commission, for their families, for those who listen to their accounts, for those who have caused harm, and for Bishop Philip in his sacrificial work on behalf of us all.

In one of our prayers of Great Thanksgiving we all say the words:

**Called to follow Christ,
help us to reconcile and unite.**

**Called to suffer,
give us hope in our calling.**

The version in te reo Maori reads:

Ka aru mātou i a te Karaiti,
tui, tui, tuituia mātou.
Tuia ki te mamae.
Tuia ki te tūmanako,
tui, tui, tuia ki te ora.

The translation is:

**Now we follow Christ,
thread, thread, thread us together.
Thread us to pain,
thread us to hope,
thread, thread, thread us to life.**

Amen.